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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1369  
INFO AMEMBASSY ANKARA  
AMEMBASSY AMMAN POUCH  
AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD  
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
AMEMBASSY CAIRO

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 03204

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR

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SUBJECT: IRANIANS IN DAMASCUS AND NOTES FROM TEHRAN

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. A RECENT VISIT OF FAMILY FRIENDS FROM TEHRAN FILLED IN SOME GAPS IN OUR INFORMATION ON THE STATUS OF IRANIAN TOURIST-PILGRIM FLIGHTS TO DAMASCUS AND PRODUCED SOME COMMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN TEHRAN. THE FLIGHTS OF JUMBO JETS FROM TEHRAN, WHICH USED TO BRING 2,500 IRANIANS TO DAMASCUS EACH WEEK, WERE INTERRUPTED IN MARCH WHEN IRAQ WARNED AIRLINES TO AVOID IRANIAN AIRSPACE. FLIGHTS FROM TEHRAN HAVE GRADUALLY RESUMED DURING THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS AND IT IS EXPECTED THAT SYRIAN AIR WILL ALSO SOON HAVE PLANES ON THE TEHRAN RUN. IRANIAN AIR FLIGHTS PROCEED FROM TEHRAN TO MESHED AND NORTH INTO THE SOVIET UNION AND OVER TURKEY TO SYRIA -- FOUR HOURS IN ALL. SEATS FROM TEHRAN ARE NOW EXTREMELY SCARCE WITH FAMILIES OF MARTYRS HAVING PRIORITY. FOR SOME REASON -- POSSIBLY NEW FLIGHTS -- SEATS ARE NOW AVAILABLE FOR THE RETURN FROM DAMASCUS TO TEHRAN.

13. EACH IRANIAN BEFORE LEAVING IRAN IS ALLOWED TO EXCHANGE AT THE OFFICIAL RATE THE EQUIVALENT OF \$100 FOR WHICH HE RECEIVES CASH THAT MUST BE EXCHANGED FOR SYRIAN CURRENCY AT THE AIRPORT ON ARRIVAL. HAVING PAID THE EQUIVALENT IN TEHRAN, HE IS GIVEN A VOUCHER FOR AN ADDITIONAL \$400 AT THE TOURIST RATE, WHICH CAN BE PICKED UP AT THE SEMIRAMIS HOTEL IN DAMASCUS. BUS TRANSPORTATION FROM TEHRAN TAKES FOUR DAYS, ONE OF WHICH IS SPENT ON FRONTIER FORMALITIES.

14. IRANIAN TOURISTS OFTEN SUPPLEMENT THEIR CASH BY BRINGING GOODS WITH THEM FROM TEHRAN. THE CAVIAR SUPPLY HAS BEEN CUT DOWN, HOWEVER, BECAUSE OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS AT TEHRAN AIRPORT WHERE PURCHASES BY RELIGIOUS PILGRIMS ARE CONSIDERED INAPPROPRIATE. IRANIAN VISITORS SHOP IN DAMASCUS FOR SOUVENIRS AND ITEMS NOT AVAILABLE IN TEHRAN.

15. RELIGIOUS DUTIES CONSIST OF VISITING THE SHRINE IN THE OMAYYAD MOSQUE IN DAMASCUS WHERE HUSSEIN'S HEAD IS BURIED. MORE IMPORTANT FOR MOST IS THE VISIT TO THE DAMASCUS SUBURB WHERE SIT ZAYNAB, SISTER OF HUSSEIN AND HASSAN, IS BURIED. ACCORDING TO TRADITION, ZAYNAB WAS BROUGHT TO DAMASCUS AT THE SAME TIME AS HUSSEIN'S HEAD. HER SHRINE IS SELDOM MENTIONED IN TOURIST LITERATURE AND WAS, UNTIL THE IRANIAN INFLUX, SCARCELY EVER VISITED. HOWEVER, SINCE IRAN IS THE RESTING PLACE OF ONLY ONE OF THE TWELVE IMANS AND IRAQ, RICH IN SHI'A REMAINS, IS OUT OF BOUNDS, SIT ZAYNAB'S TOMB HAS ACQUIRED A NEW PROMINENCE.

16. ALTHOUGH A SIMILAR SHRINE IN IRAN OR IRAQ WOULD NOT BE OPEN TO NON-MOSLEMS, SYRIAN TOLERANCE PREVAILS HERE, WITH THE ONLY WARNING IN ENGLISH BEING: "MAKE UP LADIES ARE NOT ALLOWED TO ENTER." BLACK CHADORS ARE AVAILABLE AT THE OUTER GATE WHERE THERE IS NO ENTRY FEE. THE ARCHITECTURAL STYLE IS PERSIAN, BUT THE MODERN SQUARE TILES WILL NEED MANY YEARS TO DEVELOP CHARACTER. THE INNER SANCTUM IS IN THE IRANIAN TRADITION, HEAVILY DECORATED WITH MIRRORED CEILING AND SILVER GRILL AROUND THE TOMB. THE SCENE INSIDE THE ENCLOSURE COULD BE FROM AN ORIENTALIST PAINTING, WITH WOMEN IN CHADORS AND MEN IN TURBANS AND LONG GARMENTS. THERE WERE ONLY A FEW

PERSONS WHO LOOKED LIKE REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS IN MILITARY UNIFORM DURING OUR VISIT ON A SATURDAY DURING NOON PRAYERS. THERE ARE NO PICTURES OF KHOMEINI ANYWHERE TO BE SEEN IN THE SHRINE AREA OR THE NEARBY STREETS. THIS COULD HARDLY BE ACCIDENTAL AND PROBABLY REFLECTS A SYRIAN REQUIREMENT. (ASAD'S PICTURE IS ALSO ABSENT.)

17. COMMENTS BY OUR PROFESSIONAL AND MERCHANT CLASS VISITORS ABOUT THE SITUATION IN TEHRAN AGREED WITH OTHER RECENT REPORTS REGARDING A GROWING MALAISE AS THE PUBLIC AWAITS THE END OF THE KHOMEINI ERA. WHETHER RUMOR OR FACT, OUR FRIENDS REPORTED FREQUENT MANIFESTATIONS OF ANTI-REGIME FEELING, INCLUDING WALL SLOGANS AND BOMBINGS THAT HAVE NOT BEEN REPORTED IN THE MEDIA. THEY ALSO SPOKE OF CONSIDERABLE USE OF ALCOHOL AMONG THE PUBLIC, WITH OPIUM THE PREFERRED DRUG OF THE CLERGY. MONTAZERI, WHO IS REPORTEDLY A HEAVY USER, IS DISMISSED AS A NOBODY. PREDICTIONS RE KHOMENEI'S SUCCESSOR CENTER ON RAFSANJANI. OPPOSITION TO THE WAR IS ALSO REPORTEDLY STRONG AND GROWING STRONGER. THOUGH OUR VISITORS DID NOT SEEM TO BELIEVE CLERICAL RULE HAD A LONG-TERM FUTURE IN IRAN, THEY COULD NOT SUGGEST WHEN OR HOW THE RETURN TO A MORE TRADITIONAL FORM OF GOVERNMENT WOULD OCCUR. THE ONLY POSITIVE THING THEY HAD TO SAY ABOUT THE KHOMEINI REGIME WAS THAT IT HAD, FOR THE TIME BEING, SUBDUED THE TUDEH PARTY.

EAGLETON